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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Impact of US Attacks on Iran

Summary

Tehran likely would respond to any US strike—even a minor one—through terrorist attacks against US facilities in the region and possibly beyond, or a military attack against US forces in the Gulf—or both. A limited or ineffective strike would strengthen the position of Iranian radicals who favor aggressive export of the revolution. They would argue that the US cannot counteract the "forces of Islam" and would push for increased subversion and terrorism. Moreover, the Islamic Revolution has inspired fanatics who now act independently of Tehran and who might retaliate against the US even without orders from Iran.

[REDACTED]

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There are potential targets, however, whose loss would seriously damage Iran's economy or military capability. We believe an effective strike on such targets would ultimately help Iranian pragmatists reduce the power of their radical colleagues.

[REDACTED]

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Iran has moderated its behavior in the past when confronted by heavy pressure. Tehran ended the hostage crisis, for example, when its leaders believed a more aggressive US administration had been elected. The Iranians also refrained from continuing major terrorist attacks in

This paper was prepared by the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA,

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Baghdad when Iraq threatened to execute important Shia prisoners if the attacks continued. [REDACTED]

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A major US strike likely would cause Iran to redouble its efforts to improve relations with the USSR. The Iranians would seek arms from Moscow, particularly air defense equipment and anti-ship weapons. We do not believe Tehran wishes to be tied to the Soviets in a close or long-term relationship, but the regime could seek to accommodate the Soviets if it believed the threat from the US was particularly grave. [REDACTED]

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So long as Moscow did not believe the US attack was a prelude for an invasion of Iran, its response would be limited. The Soviets probably would respond favorably to Iranian requests for equipment to augment air and coastal defenses. They would hope thereby to increase Soviet influence in Iran while seeking to minimize any adverse impact on relations with Baghdad by emphasizing that Soviet assistance was in response to US actions. [REDACTED]

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Reactions from the Gulf Arab states to a retaliatory US strike against Iran would depend on the justification, location, severity, and success of the US action. Oman and Saudi Arabia, both of whom fear being tagged as American puppets, would be unlikely to sanction use of their military facilities in support of a US strike. [REDACTED]

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Potential Targets

Any US strike is likely to engender a quick Iranian reaction against US targets. US strikes against targets of only minimal importance, even if successful, will be interpreted by many in the leadership as evidence of US weakness. Attacks against major targets would still cause the Iranian regime to respond forcefully against the US but the long term effect could strengthen pragmatists in the regime. Direct US strikes on Iran might cause the Iranians to attempt terrorist attacks inside the United States. [REDACTED]

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Military

Five years of war against Iraq and a continuing arms embargo have weakened the Iranian Armed Forces considerably, leaving relatively few high value military targets in the country. The destruction of minor military targets probably would convince Iranian leaders that the US threat is not credible. The loss of certain facilities and weapons, however, would severely limit Iranian capabilities against Iraq and Tehran's ability to defend its coasts. But major strikes would result in casualties among Iranian military personnel, eroding the considerable good will toward the United States that still exists in the regular forces. [REDACTED]

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Early Warning Radars at Bandar Abbas, Chah Bahar, and Jask. These radars give Iran warning of air attacks over the southern part of the country. Although their loss would not affect Iran's military capabilities against

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Iraq, it would leave Iran vulnerable to additional US attacks. Since Iran's Air Force is incapable of defending the country even with these sites, however, Iranian leaders are likely to view their destruction as an ineffective US response. [REDACTED]

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Naval Bases at Bushehr and Bandar Abbas. Iran's remaining destroyers, frigates, and patrol boats are located at these two bases. Their loss would greatly hinder Iran's ability to protect shipping bound for Khark Island or to patrol the areas around the Strait of Hormuz. [REDACTED]

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Persian Gulf Radars and the Two F-14 Bases. Iran depends on ground radars at Bushehr and Khark, and airborne radars aboard F-14 fighter aircraft based at Isfahan and Shiraz, to provide warning of Iraqi attacks on shipping in the Gulf. Without these radars and aircraft Iran would be vulnerable to Iraqi or US attacks on Khark Island, Bushehr Naval Base, and the port of Bandar-e Khomeini. Iraq also could take advantage of the lack of Iranian defenses to increase its attacks on shipping in the northern Gulf. A US attack on these targets probably would be regarded by Iran as direct intervention by the US on the Iraqi side in the war. [REDACTED]

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All Iranian Air Force Bases. Over 90 percent of Iran's remaining operational combat aircraft are based at six airbases. Destruction of these aircraft would leave Iran unable to defend itself against Iraqi air attacks and further strikes by the US. The Iranian Air Force also would have almost no capability to retaliate against US forces in the Gulf. Attacks by Revolutionary Guards flying civilian aircraft, however, would still be possible. [REDACTED]

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Economic.

Iran's economy is already experiencing major difficulties as a result of the war, ineffective management, and corruption. Sharply reduced oil revenues, Iran's only major source of foreign income, are causing the regime to clamp down on imports. Popular discontent has risen, and a number of labor strikes have recently occurred. Listed below are three economic target categories, each of which offers targets whose loss would cause damage to the economy ranging from minimal to crippling. [REDACTED]

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Ports:

Bandar-e Jask and Chah Bahar. These ports on the Gulf of Oman import negligible quantities of goods, and their loss would have no effect on the Iranian economy. [REDACTED]

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Bushehr. Primarily a naval base, it handles about seven percent of Iran's seaborne imports and four percent of total imports. Its loss would have little economic impact, and other ports probably could make up most of the loss. [REDACTED]

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Bandar-e Khomeini. Iran's biggest port before the war, its approaches are frequently subject to Iraqi attacks that limit its use to about 70 percent of prewar capacity. The port currently handles about 33 percent of Iran's seaborne imports and 20 percent of overall imports. [REDACTED]

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Bandar-e Abbas. This port handles 60 percent of seaborne imports and about 37 percent of total imports. It recently was expanded and a railroad link with the interior is being built. The loss of Bandar-e Abbas would be a severe blow to the Iranian economy and other ports and overland routes through Turkey and the USSR could not replace the loss. Food shortages almost certainly would worsen, especially if storage facilities at the port are destroyed. [REDACTED]

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Oil Export Facilities

Khark Island Terminal. Khark is the most critical oil facility in Iran and its loss would have a severe impact on Iran's economy. Khark handled almost 90 percent of Iran's oil exports in 1984--averaging 1.5 million b/d. Large excess loading and storage capacity at Khark means that severe damage throughout the facility would be required to stop operations. Existing foreign assets and oil revenues from Lavan and Sirri could maintain the Iranian economy for only a few months if Khark were destroyed. [REDACTED]

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Lavan and Sirri Terminals. These facilities have become important because they are out of range of Iraqi attacks. Exports currently average about 80,000 b/d from Sirri and 120,000 b/d from Lavan. There is little loading or storage flexibility at either terminal and extensive damage would disable them for an extended period. Iran could offset the loss of only these facilities by increasing exports from Khark Island. [REDACTED]

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Oil Refineries and Electrical Plants.

Refineries. Iran's most important refineries are in Tehran and Isfahan, each of which contain 35 percent of Iran's domestic capacity. Tabriz refinery has about 15 percent of capacity and Shiraz, Lavan, and Kermanshah refineries produce the rest. Iran already is suffering shortages of fuel oil and gasoline, and the destruction of substantial refinery capacity would severely disrupt Iran's economy and ability to maintain the war with Iraq. The impact would be especially severe if the US strikes occurred in the winter. [REDACTED]

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Electrical Plants. Eight power plants provide most of the electricity for Tehran, Isfahan, and Khuzestan Province. The Neka and Shahriar thermal powerplants and the Rey gas turbine plant provide 85 percent of the power for the Tehran area. Isfahan relies on two thermal plants while two hydropower plants and a thermal plant provide nearly all of the electricity for Khuzestan Province. The loss of electric generating capacity in any of these areas would stifle local economic activity and, in the case of Khuzestan, could seriously hinder Iranian military operations. It would take several years to repair major destruction of these facilities. [REDACTED]

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Impact on Iranian-Soviet Relations

Iran would try to improve relations with the Soviets as a result of a US strike. Iraq's campaign against oil tankers calling at Iranian ports initially scared Tehran, and it attempted to sound out Moscow on improved ties. Tehran resumed that effort after the US and Iraq reestablished

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diplomatic relations. Both times, however, Tehran was unwilling to make any concessions to the Soviets to reduce bilateral tensions. The clerics remain deeply suspicious of Moscow's intentions toward Iran and fear the appeal of Marxism to Iran's educated youth. [REDACTED]

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The regime, however, would take a very pragmatic view toward relations with Moscow if threatened by the US. It could seek to accommodate the USSR, for example, by cancelling trials of leaders of the Tudeh Communist Party and by reducing propaganda against Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. [REDACTED]

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In return, Tehran would seek arms from the Soviets, particularly air defense equipment and anti-ship weapons. We believe Moscow would respond favorably. Moscow would also warn the US to cease such attacks and not to intervene in Iran. The Soviets probably also would step up air defense activity within the USSR, augment their limited naval forces in the region--but keep them at a safe distance--and might mobilize airborne units and ground forces near Iran. [REDACTED]

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If the Soviets believed that US strikes were a prelude to the occupation of Iranian ports or oil fields, they probably would seek to deter the US by threatening to come to Iran's aid and by beginning military preparations. The USSR would cite provisions of the 1921 Soviet-Iranian treaty -- that the Khomeini regime abrogated -- which permits Soviet forces to intervene in Iran in response to military action in Iran by a third party. Any chance of an actual Soviet invasion, however, would be reduced considerably if Moscow believed US actions were limited and temporary. [REDACTED]

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Responses of Iran's Radical Arab Allies

Syria would respond to an attack on its Iranian ally with predictably harsh rhetoric, but the Assad regime is likely to see potential benefits in such a development. They would hope a strike would ease the difficulty Damascus confronts in justifying its support of non-Arab Iran to its fellow Arabs. If a strike increased Iran's dependence on Syria in obtaining arms supplies, Syria's leverage to continue extracting Iranian oil deliveries at concessional rates would be increased. [REDACTED]

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We expect Libya would react in part by appealing to the Soviet Union to strengthen Libyan defenses against US attack, including air defense systems Moscow so far has not yet provided. A US attack on Iran probably would cause Qadhafi to reconsider his reluctance to offer the Soviets increased military access to Libyan facilities. [REDACTED]

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Qadhafi would castigate moderate Arab regimes that withhold condemnation of the US. At the same time, Tripoli probably would quietly renew offers to revive a dialogue with Washington in an effort to lessen the US threat. Qadhafi's increased fear that the US would attack Libya with little provocation would reinforce his reluctance to engage Libya directly in terrorist operations against US personnel and facilities. [REDACTED]

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Reaction of the GCC states

Public and private Gulf Arab reactions to a retaliatory US strike against Iran would depend on the location, severity, and success of the US action as well as its justification. Saudi Arabia and other GCC states fear Iran's use of terrorism and subversion against them and favor actions designed to discourage such actions. But the Gulf Arabs also recognize their military and manpower weaknesses vis-a-vis Iran, and wish to avoid a direct confrontation. [REDACTED]

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All the GCC states would prefer a quick, successful, and "surgical" US strike. Saudi Arabia and Oman would be privately supportive but would wish to avoid aggravating the perception that they are US puppets. Even Kuwait might mute its criticism if the US move was clearly perceived as retaliation for an Iranian sponsored terrorist act against the US. The longer a direct US-Iranian military confrontation dragged on, the more the GCC states would feel the need to distance themselves from the US action. [REDACTED]

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These governments would be angered by unauthorized use of their territory or overflights. The Gulf states could also scale back US access if Iran stepped up intimidation of the GCC states in retaliation for a US strike. [REDACTED]

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Prompt US explanation of the action--both privately to the Gulf governments and publicly--would be important. The Saudis and Omanis--as our two major military allies in the Gulf--would appreciate being informed before the strike became public, and especially before Tehran or Moscow could present their version of events. It would be important, particularly for the Saudis and Omanis, for the US to announce that no Arab military facilities--including US AWACS in Saudi Arabia--were used in the attack. [REDACTED]

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A Strike in Lebanon

If the US struck against targets in Lebanon--site of several Iranian-sponsored terrorist attacks against the US--Iran would be less directly associated with the strike and hence would have less need to respond directly. The strike would also be perceived in Iran as much less threatening to the Khomeini regime. Nonetheless, Iranian surrogates would respond in Lebanon. [REDACTED]

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A strike against Lebanon would be perceived in the region as more easily justified since it would hit the terrorists themselves--especially if it followed on the heels of a terrorist incident there. The GCC states would probably find it easier to be openly supportive of the US. A strike in Lebanon, however, would not end terrorist incidents by Islamic radicals. Even if US actions convinced Tehran to cease aiding its fanatical supporters in the Muslim world, they would be unlikely to stop their activities. Indeed, US actions could inspire them anew to seek martyrdom while drawing more Muslims into their ranks. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Impact of US Attacks on Iran

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